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Bow Before the Portrait: Sino-North Korean Relations Enter the Kim Jong Un Era

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By Adam Cathcart

The pigs were being slaughtered in the streets when the news of Kim Jong Il's death arrived in Dachuan, a small logging village in the mountains of western Sichuan province. Over the immense and extended cacophony of the blood-letting, the retired head of the local bank explained, with a bit of apologetic joy, that the villagers were getting ready for Spring Festival, then turned back to the news from Pyongyang, shaking his head at the retrograde tendencies of China's Korean socialist brothers.

It was a fitting juxtaposition, watching events in North Korea amid the production of reams of red pork with rich peasants in China. Meat, after all, was the sine qua non of success for Kim Il Sung and his son, both of whom proclaimed their magnanimous desire to make good on the promise of "rice with meat soup" in every pot (and a tile roof for every rural house). Yet, as even a cursory read of virtually any analysis or short trip to the North Korean border with China can attest, the battle for higher living standards—as opposed to monuments—in essentially every place outside of the DPRK's model capital has been lost. Mao Zedong said he could do without meat, making revolution with just grain and rifles, but North Korea has ample rifles but no grain, and the revolution is dead.

Amid the welter of random, confusing, instructive, and occasionally cruel responses to Kim Jong Il's death among Chinese, Mao Zedong's death in 1976 has been a touchstone. This particular parallel, encouraged by Chinese state media, is significant because it implicitly holds out the hope that a market-oriented North Korean Deng Xiaoping might yet emerge out of the factions assumed to be maneuvering in Pyongyang. But North Korea is hardly exiting the "fractured rebellion" of a Cultural Revolution. The DPRK remains instead in the thrall of a persistently centralized leadership system in which Kim Il Sung and his son had purged, jailed, exiled, or killed all the advocates of possible systemic alternatives. In Andrei Lankov's phrase, the "blade of state of state remains sharp enough to cut off its diseased parts," and gazing at the grizzled ranks of the Pyongyang senior elite, it seems unlikely that some wholesale adoption of Chinese-style market reforms is in the offing.

The Reluctant Embrace of Kim Jong Un

On December 21, Wen Jiabao went to the North Korean embassy in Beijing, bowed to Kim Jong Il's portrait, and said: "We believe that with the Korean Workers' Party under the leadership of comrade Kim Jong Un, the North Korean people will certainly powerfully pass through their grief, pushing forward to new successes in socialist construction." It was a turn of events which but a few years earlier would have been seen as unlikely. Since Kim Jong Il's stroke in 2008, and the rumors of Kim Jong Un's existence as a viable successor to his father in early 2009, the CCP has gone through a number of stances toward the idea, ending in the acceptance of the successor. In the aftermath of the North Korean nuclear test of May 2009, Beijing loosened its grip on

journalism about the DPRK in the Chinese media, using the new latitude to serve the Party's foreign policy purposes. Publications about the North Korean role in starting the Korean War were suddenly acceptable, and, more importantly, a number of unflattering portrayals of the "weird" Kim family began to emerge. Chinese public intellectuals like Zhu Feng and Shen Dingli speculated about rapid changes in North Korea and the CCP made clear its desire, at the very least, for North Korea to transition to a more collective leadership centered in the Korean Workers' Party rather than in the enfeebled Kim Jong Il or his relatively unknown successor.

However, after Kim Jong Un's formal unveiling at the September 2010 KWP Congress in Pyongyang, the discourse shifted decisively toward a more supportive line toward the "young general." Likenesses between Chinese and North Korean political cultures were emphasized; in mass magazine portrayals, CCP scholars encouraged Kim Jong Un to "make his mark via some achievements in writing about communist theory."

Even Kim Jong Un's foreign experience was highlighted in Chinese media as beneficial. It seemed that in some important ways, Kim Jong Un could be used to send home the message to China's unreceptive youth: It may be fine to spend a few years studying abroad and fall in love with Michael Jordan, but when you come home, it's all about the Young Pioneers and Party building. More importantly, the junior Kim's probable role in North Korean attacks on the South Korean vessel "Cheonan" in March 2010 and on Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010 was downplayed in the PRC. South Korean stories which asserted that Kim Jong Un had assumed control over North Korea's northern border security, like most narratives focused on refugees, did not enter the public discourse in China.

The CCP's evident nervousness about stability in North Korea, and its protective stance toward the DPRK, means that no loud public doubts about Kim Jong Un's inexperience are presently welcome. Suggestions that the successor is incapable of leading, when allowed at all, are placed in the mouths of foreign experts like the International Crisis Group's Daniel Pinkston, and qualified with some implication that South Korean media reports could all be false anyway.

North Korea appears to have made only a minor rhetorical concession to Chinese pressure by referring to the idea of "uniting around the Korean Workers' Party and Comrade Kim Jong Un," a phrase codified in the DPRK's official response to the Chinese Foreign Ministry's initial statement of regret at Kim Jong Il's death.

Economic and Cultural Exchanges

The legacy of Kim Jong Il's rapid—one might almost say rushed—advancement of cooperation with China in 2010 and 2011 hangs in the balance, and the CCP will be eager for cross-border trade and tourism to resume. A rather explicit December 20 editorial in the *Huanqiu Shibao*, entitled "China is the Reliable Friend Upon Which North Korea Can Rely during Transition," stated: "We suggest that as soon as it is appropriate, Chinese high-level leaders go to North Korea, where they will intimately communicate with North Korea's new leaders at this special time that Pyongyang can send a distinct signal to the world [by taking the Chinese path]."

In the weeks prior to Kim Jong Il's death, China had been pressing for more clarification and motion on the two new island trade zones in the Yalu River near Sinuiju. While the Chinese side

has been investing an immense amount of money in construction of what is essentially a new city outside of Dandong and a large new super-highway worthy bridge to the DPRK, the North Pyong'an leadership has been everything that privately infuriates Chinese partners: uncommunicative, inaccessible, and (according to the *Daily NK*) suddenly purged.

Far more promising is the development at Rason, on the far northeastern edge of the Korean peninsula, where China has brought in an old Korea hand named Tian Baozhu, a Kim Il Sung University graduate and former Consul-General in Pusan, to set conditions for further Chinese investment in this highly-desired port which finally offers eastern Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces access to the sea and cheaper means of shipping coal to ports like Shanghai. Rason remains a source of rumors from South Korea and the active advocates of immediate North Korean collapse, who often imply that China is not simply constructing the port but has secured it with a few thousand PLA troops. Such impressions are unlikely to slow the CCP in its push for more access and faster development of Chinese business interests, particularly in the minerals sector, in North Korea.

Chinese cultural exchanges with North Korea have been, in the DPRK context, incredibly extensive. The oft-maligned Korean Central News Agency has opened up exchanges with Xinhua, performing arts delegations tour across the Chinese mainland, and a Confucius Institute is open in Pyongyang with some 800 students. Tourism to the DPRK, another area of possible peril—seven Chinese tourists and businessmen were killed in a mysterious crash outside of Pyongyang on Thanksgiving Day—is an area where the Chinese side puts a great deal of stock and aims to develop further from even remote cities like Qiqihar and Mudanjiang. The extent to which the North Korean side remains committed to the speed and intensity of these relationships is something which the Chinese government is particularly keen to observe.

Border security on the northern frontier remains a complex and sensitive issue, as well as military-to-military relations. The fact that eight North Korean border guards were reputed to have run headlong into the Liaoning hills in late November is not to be forgotten; the fact that China was hosting the Japanese Self-Defense Forces Navy in Qingdao (of all places) from December 19-23 is another area which under normal conditions might cause strain on Sino-North Korean relations.

Kim Jong Il's death does not alter the fundamentals of the bilateral relationship, but it does offer an opportunity to take stock of this most fraught and significant relationship. The speed and intimacy with which it continues is of interest to us all.

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